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ABSTRACT

Many educators think that the end result of minimum competency programs has been the lowering of the quality of learning by most students. It appears that once minimum competencies are held up as the expected level of attainment for all students, there is a tendency to aim all instruction toward those competencies to the exclusion of a wider range of learning possibilities. With the advent of minimum competency testing and its effects upon reading instruction, it appears that neither teachers nor students have their sights set on excelling. Factors contributing to this state of affairs include the public's lack of confidence in the public schools and their staffs and legislative demands for myriad standardized tests. Such massive testing requires excessive time, money, and effort for the dubious benefit of an uninformed public. Four things for educators to consider in combatting the tendency to teach toward minimum competencies in reading are (1) avoid teaching toward the test, (2) give students exposure to a wide range of reading activities regardless of the method used to test their performance, (3) expect more than minimum competence from students, and (4) avoid teaching reading skills in the isolation by which they are frequently tested. In spite of the problems, competency testing has brought about efforts to discover how well teachers are teaching all students to read and to examine the reading curriculum more carefully. (HTH)

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Minimum Competency Doesn't Mean Minimum Teaching

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From the beginning I wish to state that the concept of minimum competency testing is one which, I believe, has had mainly a negative effect on the teaching of reading. Yet such testing has achieved great significance within and influence over the teaching profession in the past few years. The basic idea of minimum competency testing was originally promulgated in order to assure all of us that all students would go through public school systems and reach at least a minimum level of learning. However, some think that the end result in systems which have implemented minimum competency programs actually has been the lowering of the quality of learning by many, if not most, students. It appears that once minimum competencies are identified, listed as objectives, and held up as the expected level of attainment by all students, there is a tendency to aim all instruction toward the achievement of those competencies. With attention focused on minimum objectives, a sort of myopia has occurred, and a wider range of learning possibilities has been lost or ignored.

In a psychology course, I once learned about a concept called the level of aspiration. Three key ideas are involved. First is a person's present level of functioning. Second is a person's potential for functioning. Third is a person's desire to achieve, or the level of aspiration. The concept of aspiration involves the relationship of these three key ideas as follows: Generally, a person's potential for functioning is greater than his or her present actual level of functioning. If the person's level of aspiration, the level at which he or she desires to operate in a task, is close to the

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present level of functioning, there is little need for the person to use more potential to reach his or her goals. If, however, the person's level of aspiration is raised--that is, if the person decides to perform a task better, the act of raising his or her level of aspiration has a positive effect upon present functioning, and the person uses more of his or her potential. For example, a person who aspires to read one book a week, does so, but could easily read three books, is not using all of his or her potential. Once that person's level of aspiration is raised to reading two books a week, the person uses more of his or her potential.

In the past, before the minimum competency concept was born, many teachers focused upon raising children's reading levels to match the children's reading potential. In fact, many authors in the field of reading encouraged teachers to use the student's listening capacity as a guide to finding the discrepancy between reading attainment and potential. Reading expectancy formulas such as Bond and Tinker's (1967, pp. 91-95) were designed to help determine gaps between performance and possible potential achievement. Listening capacity and reading potential may have been poorly defined in teachers' minds, but there was a feeling of promise within teachers that, with work and time, students could reach higher levels of attainment than they were presently exhibiting. Many teachers had a high level of aspiration for their students. This positive expectancy on the part of teachers, in turn, may have positively influenced student performance.

With the advent of minimum competency testing and its effects upon teaching, however, it appears that neither teachers nor students have their sights set on excelling. Indeed, in many instances, the levels of aspiration of both teachers and students may have decreased to such an extent that both believe that minimum attainment (i.e., minimum competency) is all that is expected of them. Perhaps, none of this is happening on a conscious level;

nevertheless, it appears to be happening in many school districts throughout America. Conversations with both students and teachers reflect an interest in working toward passing, or helping students pass, minimum competency examinations while letting other matters slide.

It is possible to trace some of the events which have led to the current problems. In the past decade there has been a tremendous lack of confidence in the public schools and the teachers who staff them. The causes are many, but they are outside the realm of this discussion. What is important to the issue at hand is that this dissatisfaction led to demands that teachers and schools do their jobs better. The force came ultimately from state legislatures. These unenlightened bodies were ignorant about the nature of the reading process, yet they did not, in most cases, seek the advice of professional educators concerning the nature of possible remedies, since it was largely in response to a lack of public trust in education that their attention had been drawn originally to the matter. Consequently, the legislative response has been in the form of minimum competency laws, mandated state testing, and continuous uniform evaluation systems (CUES). For their mode of evaluation, state legislatures turned mainly to standardized tests. Presently, some states require standardized testing of all students at all grade levels in order to check their growth. Informal teacher appraisals and criterion referenced measurements are not widely accepted for this purpose, because they are seen as less objective and self-serving.

The forced use of thousands and thousands of standardized tests to measure growth and achievement in reading, coupled with teachers' fears that they, in turn, may be held accountable if their students do not do well on the tests, have had a major impact on the teaching of reading in most classrooms. In fact, this chain of events may be the basic reason why minimum competency now means minimum teaching in so many places.

Consider the impact of such massive testing. First, a tremendous amount of instructional time and money are lost in the giving and scoring of standardized tests. Analyzing the findings takes an even greater amount of time. Still more time is spent explaining and/or defending the results to a public that does not understand terms such as "standard error of measurement" and "stanine," but a public that focuses on terms such as "grade equivalent." The very acts of administering, scoring, analyzing and explaining the tests have caused tests to have an unwarranted power in the minds of many teachers.

Next, consider the tests themselves. Many texts and editorials have been written about the limitations of standardized tests and the danger of testing a myriad of fragmented skills. Test validity has been questioned time and time again, yet this argument is lost on an uninformed public. Indeed, there is much debate among professionals about whether the reading process can be adequately understood and analyzed, and whether reading ability is a unitary or integrated phenomenon. Whatever the outcome of these debates may be, it is clear that some students do well on tests but do not read well, and other students who are productive readers do not do well on tests. All of this raises questions about the quality of objectives tested and about the tests themselves.

What has resulted from massive testing and a concern for guaranteeing minimum competency for all? It is likely, because of the factors mentioned above, that the main consequence is tunnel vision in the teaching of reading. We have lost instructional time. We have lost sight of the broader aspects of the reading process. We have lost opportunities for dealing with many nuances of the reading process which cannot be measured by standardized tests. We have gained a legislated system that can easily lead us to produce poorer and poorer readers unless we guard against myopia. We have gained a more critical, less supportive public.

Minimum competency does not have to mean minimum teaching. In fact, as the situation now stands, it behooves all of us to maximize our teaching, because it is only through better teaching that students will meet artificial minimum standards and go beyond them. It is important to remember that there are two ways to raise an arithmetic mean. One way is to raise the scores of the low scoring students. The other way is to improve the scores of the high achieving students. One would hope that our goal as teachers of reading is to do both, even though the low achievers have received more than their share of attention in the past two or three decades.

Here are some thoughts to consider in combatting the tendency to teach toward minimum competencies.

1. We cannot allow ourselves to scrutinize standardized tests and plan instruction so that we are only teaching toward the tests. The tail cannot wag the dog! The same is true of the management systems or CUES systems which might be in effect in our schools. Students need something extra when they take tests. If they have only the minimum amount of knowledge when they go into the tests, it is possible that they will not show even minimum levels of attainment. Students need something in reserve--additional knowledge that they can bring to bear during testing.

2. The reading process is much more involved than any test or list of skills can measure. So far researchers have not been able to untangle the many interrelated abilities which affect the reading process. It appears, however, that there is an interrelatedness of understandings, skills and abilities which, when operating in conjunction with one another, enables readers to function more appropriately. Students need exposure to a wide range of reading activities regardless of the method being used to test their

reading performance. If they have only a minimum number of exposures to the reading process before they take the tests, they will do less well.

3. Minimum competency cannot be accepted as a satisfactory outcome of instruction. Neither you nor I would entrust our lives to a surgeon who exhibits only minimum competency on the job. We complain when we buy an automobile or other consumer product which soon proves to be tailored to minimum requirements. We expect more than minimum competency from people who work for us. Although we may meet the letter of the law if we produce students who exhibit minimum competency on reading tests, we cannot be satisfied doing so. It is simply unprofessional to lower our expectations of student performance to the same minimum level for all students.

4. Fragmentation of skills and overattention to minute aspects of the reading process which are easily testable will not facilitate good reading. Once the finding is made that a student "is weak" in a certain skill, there is a tendency on the part of some teachers to find specific materials to give the student to "remediate" the skill deficiency. Soon the student might be practicing the skill in sets of isolated drills in so-called "skill builder" materials. Perhaps the student may soon be able to complete the exercises in a passable fashion, and the teacher might assume that the "skill deficiency" is removed. Often, this simply is not the case. Many students can show an understanding of a skill when completing specially created exercises. However, when they are placed in reading situations in which the artificial structures are removed, they cannot exhibit an understanding of the skill. If students are directed to exercises artificially designed to deal with a specific skill, it is quite possible that they will not be able to integrate such knowledge into the reading act in normal reading situations.

The minimum competency concept is likely to remain with the teaching profession in the foreseeable future. In fact, more and more states and school districts have adopted the concept in recent years. In spite of the measurement problems and questions of validity, perhaps some good may have come from the concept. For the first time an effort has been made to discover how well we are teaching all students to read. We have begun to examine the reading curriculum in a more careful manner. The dangers which I have discussed above come from the possible discontinuance of productive aspects of instruction which have been routine in the past. Perhaps a combination of former productive practices and a new awareness of standards will one day help us to produce better readers. We still have a long way to go.